

## 15.1 — Intro to smart pointers and move semantics

BY ALEX ON FEBRUARY 17TH, 2017 | LAST MODIFIED BY ALEX ON MAY 24TH, 2017

Consider a function in which we dynamically allocate a value:

```
1 void someFunction()
2 {
3     Resource *ptr = new Resource; // Resource is a struct or class
4
5     // do stuff with ptr here
6
7     delete ptr;
8 }
```

Although the above code seems fairly straightforward, it's fairly easy to forget to deallocate `ptr`. Even if you do remember to delete `ptr` at the end of the function, there are a myriad of ways that `ptr` may not be deleted if the function exits early. This can happen via an early return:

```
1 #include <iostream>
2
3 void someFunction()
4 {
5     Resource *ptr = new Resource;
6
7     int x;
8     std::cout << "Enter an integer: ";
9     std::cin >> x;
10
11     if (x == 0)
12         return; // the function returns early, and ptr won't be deleted!
13
14     // do stuff with ptr here
15
16     delete ptr;
17 }
```

or via a thrown exception:

```
1 #include <iostream>
2
3 void someFunction()
4 {
5     Resource *ptr = new Resource;
6
7     int x;
8     std::cout << "Enter an integer: ";
9     std::cin >> x;
10
11     if (x == 0)
12         throw 0; // the function returns early, and ptr won't be deleted!
13
14     // do stuff with ptr here
15
16     delete ptr;
17 }
```

In the above two programs, the early return or throw statement execute, causing the function to terminate without variable `ptr` being deleted. Consequently, the memory allocated for variable `ptr` is now leaked (and will be leaked again every time

this function is called and returns early).

At heart, these kinds of issues occur because pointer variables have no inherent mechanism to clean up after themselves.

### Smart pointer classes to the rescue?

One of the best things about classes is that they contain destructors that automatically get executed when an object of the class goes out of scope. So if you allocate (or acquire) memory in your constructor, you can deallocate it in your destructor, and be guaranteed that the memory will be deallocated when the class object is destroyed (regardless of whether it goes out of scope, gets explicitly deleted, etc...). This is at the heart of the RAII programming paradigm that we talked about in lesson **8.7 – Destructors**.

So can we use a class to help us manage and clean up our pointers? We can!

Consider a class whose sole job was to hold and “own” a pointer passed to it, and then deallocate that pointer when the class object went out of scope. As long as objects of that class were only created as local variables, we could guarantee that the class would properly go out of scope (regardless of when or how our functions terminate) and the owned pointer would get destroyed.

Here’s a first draft of the idea:

```

1  #include <iostream>
2
3  template<class T>
4  class Auto_ptr1
5  {
6      T* m_ptr;
7  public:
8      // Pass in a pointer to "own" via the constructor
9      Auto_ptr1(T* ptr=nullptr)
10         :m_ptr(ptr)
11     {
12     }
13
14     // The destructor will make sure it gets deallocated
15     ~Auto_ptr1()
16     {
17         delete m_ptr;
18     }
19
20     // Access to the underlying pointer/data if desired (for completeness)
21     T& operator*() const { return *m_ptr; }
22     T* operator->() const { return m_ptr; }
23 };
24
25 // A sample class to prove the above works
26 class Resource
27 {
28 public:
29     Resource() { std::cout << "Resource acquired\n"; }
30     ~Resource() { std::cout << "Resource destroyed\n"; }
31 };
32
33 int main()
34 {
35     Auto_ptr1<Resource> res(new Resource); // Note the allocation of memory here
36
37     // ... but no explicit delete needed
38
39     // Also note that the Resource in angled braces doesn't need a * symbol, since that's supplied by the template
40
41 
```

```

42     return 0;
    } // res goes out of scope here, and destroys the allocated Resource for us

```

This program prints:

```

Resource acquired
Resource destroyed

```

Consider how this program and class work. First, we dynamically create a Resource, and pass it as a parameter to our templated Auto\_ptr1 class. From that point forward, our Auto\_ptr1 variable res owns that Resource object (Auto\_ptr1 has a composition relationship with m\_ptr). Because res is declared as a local variable and has block scope, it will go out of scope when the block ends, and be destroyed (no worries about forgetting to deallocate it). And because it is a class, when it is destroyed, the Auto\_ptr1 destructor will be called. That destructor will ensure that the Resource pointer it is holding gets deleted!

As long as Auto\_ptr1 is defined as a local variable (with automatic duration, hence the “Auto” part of the class name), the Resource will be guaranteed to be destroyed at the end of block its declared in, regardless of how the function terminates (even if it terminates early).

Such a class is called a smart pointer. A **Smart pointer** is a composition class that is designed to manage dynamically allocated memory (“dumb” pointers) and ensure that memory gets deleted when the smart pointer object goes out of scope.

Now let’s go back to our doSomething() example above, and show how a smart pointer class can solve our challenge:

```

1  #include <iostream>
2
3  template<class T>
4  class Auto_ptr1
5  {
6      T* m_ptr;
7  public:
8      // Pass in a pointer to "own" via the constructor
9      Auto_ptr1(T* ptr=nullptr)
10         :m_ptr(ptr)
11     {
12     }
13
14     // The destructor will make sure it gets deallocated
15     ~Auto_ptr1()
16     {
17         delete m_ptr;
18     }
19
20     // Access to the underlying pointer/data if desired (for completeness)
21     T& operator*() const { return *m_ptr; }
22     T* operator->() const { return m_ptr; }
23 };
24
25 // A sample class to prove the above works
26 class Resource
27 {
28 public:
29     Resource() { std::cout << "Resource acquired\n"; }
30     ~Resource() { std::cout << "Resource destroyed\n"; }
31     void sayHi() { std::cout << "Hi\n"; }
32 };
33
34 void someFunction()
35 {
36     Auto_ptr1<Resource> ptr(new Resource); // ptr now owns the Resource

```

```

37
38     int x;
39     std::cout << "Enter an integer: ";
40     std::cin >> x;
41
42     if (x == 0)
43         return; // the function returns early
44
45     // do stuff with ptr here
46     ptr->sayHi();
47 }
48
49 int main()
50 {
51     someFunction();
52
53     return 0;
54 }

```

If the user enters a non-zero integer, the above program will print:

```

Resource acquired
Hi!
Resource destroyed

```

If the user enters zero, the above program will terminate early, printing:

```

Resource acquired
Resource destroyed

```

Note that even in the case where the user enters zero and the function terminates early, the Resource is still properly deallocated.

Because the ptr variable is a local variable, ptr will be destroyed when the function terminates (regardless of how it terminates). And because the Auto\_ptr1 destructor will clean up the Resource, we are assured that the Resource will be properly cleaned up.

### A critical flaw

The Auto\_ptr1 class has a critical flaw lurking behind some auto-generated code. Before reading further, see if you can identify what it is. We'll wait...

(Hint: consider what parts of a class get auto-generated if you don't supply them)

(Jeopardy music)

Okay, time's up.

Rather than tell you, we'll show you. Consider the following program:

```

1  #include <iostream>
2
3  // Same as above
4  template<class T>
5  class Auto_ptr1
6  {
7      T* m_ptr;
8  public:
9      Auto_ptr1(T* ptr=nullptr)

```

```

10         :m_ptr(ptr)
11     {
12     }
13
14     ~Auto_ptr1()
15     {
16         delete m_ptr;
17     }
18
19     T& operator*() const { return *m_ptr; }
20     T* operator->() const { return m_ptr; }
21 };
22
23 class Resource
24 {
25 public:
26     Resource() { std::cout << "Resource acquired\n"; }
27     ~Resource() { std::cout << "Resource destroyed\n"; }
28 };
29
30 int main()
31 {
32     Auto_ptr1<Resource> res1(new Resource);
33     Auto_ptr1<Resource> res2(res1); // Alternatively, don't initialize res2 and then assign
34     res2 = res1;
35
36     return 0;
37 }

```

This program prints:

```

Resource acquired
Resource destroyed
Resource destroyed

```

and then crashes. See the problem now? Because we haven't supplied a copy constructor or an assignment operator, C++ provides one for us. And the functions it provides do shallow copies. So when we initialize `res2` with `res1`, both `Auto_ptr1` variables are pointed at the same `Resource`. When `res1` goes out of the scope, it deletes the resource, leaving `res2` with a dangling pointer. When `res2` goes to delete its (already deleted) `Resource`, crash!

You'd run into a similar problem with a function like this:

```

1 void passByValue(Auto_ptr1<Resource> res)
2 {
3 }
4
5 int main()
6 {
7     Auto_ptr1<Resource> res1(new Resource);
8     passByValue(res1)
9
10    return 0;
11 }

```

In this program, `res1` will be copied by value into `passByValue`'s parameter `res`, leading to duplication of the `Resource` pointer. Crash!

So clearly this isn't good. How can we address this?

Well, one thing we could do would be to delete the copy constructor and assignment operator, thereby preventing any copies from being made in the first place. That would prevent the pass by value case (which is good, we probably shouldn't be passing these by value anyway).

But then how would we return an `Auto_ptr1` from a function back to the caller?

```

1  ??? generateResource()
2  {
3      Resource *r = new Resource;
4      return Auto_ptr(r);
5  }
```

We can't do it by reference, because the local `Auto_ptr1` we've created will be destroyed and the caller will be left with a dangling reference. And we don't want to do it by address, otherwise we might forget to delete it, which is the whole point of smart pointers in the first place! Pass by value is the only option that makes sense, but then we end up with shallow copies, duplicated pointers, and crashes.

Another option would be to override the copy constructor and assignment operator to make deep copies. In this way, we'd at least guarantee to avoid duplicate pointers to the same object. But copying can be expensive (and may not be desirable or even possible), and we don't want to make needless copies of objects just to return an `Auto_ptr1` from a function. Plus assigning or initializing a dumb pointer doesn't copy the object being pointed to, so why would we expect smart pointers to behave differently?

What do we do?

## Move semantics

What if, instead of having our copy constructor and assignment operator copy the pointer ("copy semantics"), we instead transfer/move ownership of the pointer from the source to the destination object? This is the core idea behind move semantics. **Move semantics** means the class will transfer ownership of the object rather than making a copy.

Let's update our `Auto_ptr1` class to show how this can be done:

```

1  #include <iostream>
2
3  template<class T>
4  class Auto_ptr2
5  {
6      T* m_ptr;
7  public:
8      Auto_ptr2(T* ptr=nullptr)
9          :m_ptr(ptr)
10     {
11     }
12
13     ~Auto_ptr2()
14     {
15         delete m_ptr;
16     }
17
18     // A copy constructor that implements move semantics
19     Auto_ptr2(Auto_ptr2& a) // note: not const
20     {
21         m_ptr = a.m_ptr; // transfer our dumb pointer from the source to our local object
22         a.m_ptr = nullptr; // make sure the source no longer owns the pointer
23     }
24
25     // An assignment operator that implements move semantics
26     Auto_ptr2& operator=(Auto_ptr2& a) // note: not const
27     {
28         if (&a == this)
```

```

29         return *this;
30
31         delete m_ptr; // make sure we deallocate any pointer the destination is already hold
32 ing first
33         m_ptr = a.m_ptr; // then transfer our dumb pointer from the source to the local obje
34 ct
35         a.m_ptr = nullptr; // make sure the source no longer owns the pointer
36         return *this;
37     }
38
39     T& operator*() const { return *m_ptr; }
40     T* operator->() const { return m_ptr; }
41     bool isNull() const { return m_ptr == nullptr; }
42 };
43
44 class Resource
45 {
46 public:
47     Resource() { std::cout << "Resource acquired\n"; }
48     ~Resource() { std::cout << "Resource destroyed\n"; }
49 };
50
51 int main()
52 {
53     Auto_ptr2<Resource> res1(new Resource);
54     Auto_ptr2<Resource> res2; // Start as nullptr
55
56     std::cout << "res1 is " << (res1.isNull() ? "null\n" : "not null\n");
57     std::cout << "res2 is " << (res2.isNull() ? "null\n" : "not null\n");
58
59     res2 = res1; // res2 assumes ownership, res1 is set to null
60
61     std::cout << "Ownership transferred\n";
62
63     std::cout << "res1 is " << (res1.isNull() ? "null\n" : "not null\n");
64     std::cout << "res2 is " << (res2.isNull() ? "null\n" : "not null\n");
65
66     return 0;
67 }

```

This program prints:

```

Resource acquired
res1 is not null
res2 is null
Ownership transferred
res1 is null
res2 is not null
Resource destroyed

```

Note that our overloaded operator= gave ownership of m\_ptr from res1 to res2! Consequently, we don't end up with duplicate copies of the pointer, and everything gets tidily cleaned up.

### std::auto\_ptr, and why to avoid it

Now would be an appropriate time to talk about std::auto\_ptr. std::auto\_ptr, introduced in C++98, was C++'s first attempt at a standardized smart pointer. std::auto\_ptr opted to implement move semantics just like the Auto\_ptr2 class does.

However, std::auto\_ptr (and our Auto\_ptr2 class) has a number of problems that makes using it dangerous.

First, because `std::auto_ptr` implements move semantics through the copy constructor and assignment operator, passing a `std::auto_ptr` by value to a function will cause your resource to get moved to the function parameter (and be destroyed at the end of the function when the function parameters goes out of scope). Then when you go to access your `auto_ptr` argument from the caller (not realizing it was transferred and deleted), you're suddenly dereferencing a null pointer. Crash!

Second, `std::auto_ptr` always deletes its contents using non-array delete. This means `auto_ptr` won't work correctly with dynamically allocated arrays, because it uses the wrong kind of deallocation. Worse, it won't prevent you from passing it a dynamic array, which it will then mismanage, leading to memory leaks.

Finally, `auto_ptr` doesn't play nice with a lot of the other classes in the standard library, including most of the containers and algorithms. This occurs because those standard library classes assume that when they copy an item, it actually makes a copy, not performs a move.

Because of the above mentioned shortcomings, `std::auto_ptr` has been deprecated in C++11, and it should not be used. In fact, `std::auto_ptr` is slated for complete removal from the standard library as part of C++17!

*Rule: `std::auto_ptr` is deprecated and should not be used. (Use `std::unique_ptr` or `std::shared_ptr` instead)..*

## Moving forward

The core problem with the design of `std::auto_ptr` is that prior to C++11, the C++ language simply had no mechanism to differentiate “copy semantics” from “move semantics”. Overriding the copy semantics to implement move semantics leads to weird edge cases and inadvertent bugs. For example, you can write `res1 = res2` and have no idea whether `res2` will be changed or not!

Because of this, in C++11, the concept of “move” was formally defined, and “move semantics” were added to the language to properly differentiate copying from moving. Now that we've set the stage for why move semantics can be useful, we'll explore the topic of move semantics throughout the rest of this chapter. We'll also fix our `Auto_ptr2` class using move semantics.

In C++11, `std::auto_ptr` been replaced by a bunch of other types of “move-aware” smart pointers: `std::scoped_ptr`, `std::unique_ptr`, `std::weak_ptr`, and `std::shared_ptr`. We'll also explore the two most popular of these: `unique_ptr` (which is a direct replacement for `auto_ptr`) and `shared_ptr`.



**[15.2 – R-value references](#)**



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**[14.x – Chapter 14 comprehensive quiz](#)**

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## 12 comments to 15.1 — Intro to smart pointers and move semantics

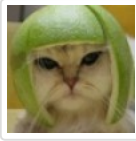




skywalker007

[May 23, 2017 at 7:23 pm · Reply](#)

How does your smart pointer implementation work in case of pass by value? You have mentioned that a demerit of `auto_ptr` is that it transfers the ownership of the pointer to the function argument which gets destroyed at the end of function call. I think this issue also applies to your version of smart pointer implementation. Can you let me know how your version of smart pointer implementation avoid this?



Alex

[May 24, 2017 at 9:21 am · Reply](#)

Yes, `Auto_ptr2` has the same flaw as `std::auto_ptr`. In future lessons in this chapter, we show how to address this issue using move semantics. So... keep reading. □

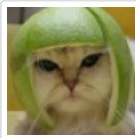


Jiaan Qi

[April 14, 2017 at 12:08 am · Reply](#)

Hello Alex:

I'm having trouble understanding the overload of member access operator `"->"` in your example. If the return type of the operator function is just a pointer, then shouldn't we use, for example, `(ptr->)->sayHi()` ?



Alex

[April 14, 2017 at 3:23 pm · Reply](#)

Operator `->` is a weird operator – the semantics are pretty counterintuitive. Remember that `a->b` is the same as `(*a).b`.

Simplifying a bit, the easiest way to think about it is that it should return a pointer that can be dereferenced. C++ handles doing the dereference and dot access part of the equation.

So for `a->b`, you return a pointer to `a`, and the compiler does the rest of `(*a).b` for you.



JoePerkins

[March 8, 2017 at 3:05 am · Reply](#)

"(Auto\_ptr1 has an composition relationship with m\_ptr)" should be "(Auto\_ptr1 has a composition relationship with m\_ptr)".

Looking forward to the `unique_ptr` lesson!



Daniel

[March 1, 2017 at 11:18 pm · Reply](#)

Typo? First "so" in "Plus assigning or copying a dumb pointer doesn't copy the object being pointed so, so" should be "to"?



Mauricio Mirabetti

[February 23, 2017 at 11:35 am · Reply](#)

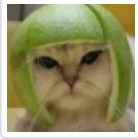
Dear Alex, a few typos:

Consequently, the memory for allocated for `->` one "for" too many  
A Smart pointer is an composition class `->` is a...

leaving res2 with a hanging pointer. -> dangling pointer  
 res1 not null -> res1 is not null  
 passing a std::auto\_ptr by value -> std::auto\_ptr  
 leaking to memory leaks. -> leading to

Nice work! Best regards.

Mauricio



Alex

[February 23, 2017 at 6:05 pm · Reply](#)

All typos fixed! Thanks for pointing those out!



aca4life

[February 21, 2017 at 5:07 am · Reply](#)

Hi Alex, three minor issues caught my attention:

1) In the beginning you showed how using dump pointers can lead to memory leakage. You therefore defined two someFuntion() functions. Within the bodies of these functions there is an if-statement:

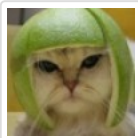
```
1 | if (someFunction() == 5) { ... }
```

I assume that this function is meant to be a different function and should therefore be called someOtherFunction() or anything like that. [someFuntion is void, and it would be an infinite recursion even if it wasn't]

2) In the Auto\_ptr1 constructor the default parameters have to be assigned by operator '=' not '==' (Auto\_ptr2 is correct though)

3) Is there any specific reason you mix NULL (Auto\_ptr2 move semantics) with nullptr? As I understood using nullptr all the time should be preferred.

keep up the good work! 😊



Alex

[February 21, 2017 at 1:32 pm · Reply](#)

1) Yes, my mistake. I've removed the inadvertently-recursive call to someFunction() and replaced it with a user-input variable.

2) Fixed, thanks for pointing this out.

3) No reason other than bad habits. ☐ I've replaced NULL with nullptr.

Thanks for the feedback!



Bobix Louis

[February 21, 2017 at 3:51 am · Reply](#)

Hi Alex,

I would say this is the best tutorial I have ever come across. The chapters are short, simple and very informative. Thanks for these nice tutorials.

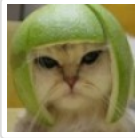
I need a small clarification regarding the statement 'A Smart pointer is an aggregation class that is designed to....'. Do you mean a smart pointer class has the properties of an aggregation (ie. Has-a relationship with the object pointer it owns)? I read in one of the earlier chapter about aggregation that an aggregation will have the following properties, but I am not able to relate those properties with the smart pointer class. Could you please help me out here a bit?

The part (member) is part of the object (class)

The part (member) can belong to more than one object (class) at a time -> I believe with move semantics(ie moving the ownership from one smart pointer to another) at a time only one smart pointer can own the object pointer.

The part (member) does not have its existence managed by the object (class) -> I believe even though smart pointer is not responsible for creating the object pointer, it is responsible for deleting the object.

The part (member) does not know about the existence of the object (class)



Alex

February 21, 2017 at 1:26 pm · Reply

Yes, you are correct. Although the smart pointer owns the part, it fails the test that the part can belong to more than one object at a time. Therefore, it cannot be an aggregation.

I think a composition is a better fit. The part cannot belong to more than one object at a time (but can be moved), and the part's existence is managed by the object.

I've updated the lesson accordingly.